



Consommation  
et Corporations Canada

Consumer and  
Corporate Affairs Canada (21) (A1)

2,052,339

Bureau des brevets

Patent Office (22)

1991/09/27

Ottawa, Canada  
K1A 0C9

(43)

1992/07/23

5,066,3/49

(51) INTL.CL.<sup>5</sup> B65B-001/26; B65B-031/04

(19) (CA) APPLICATION FOR CANADIAN PATENT (12)

(54) Vacuum Fill System

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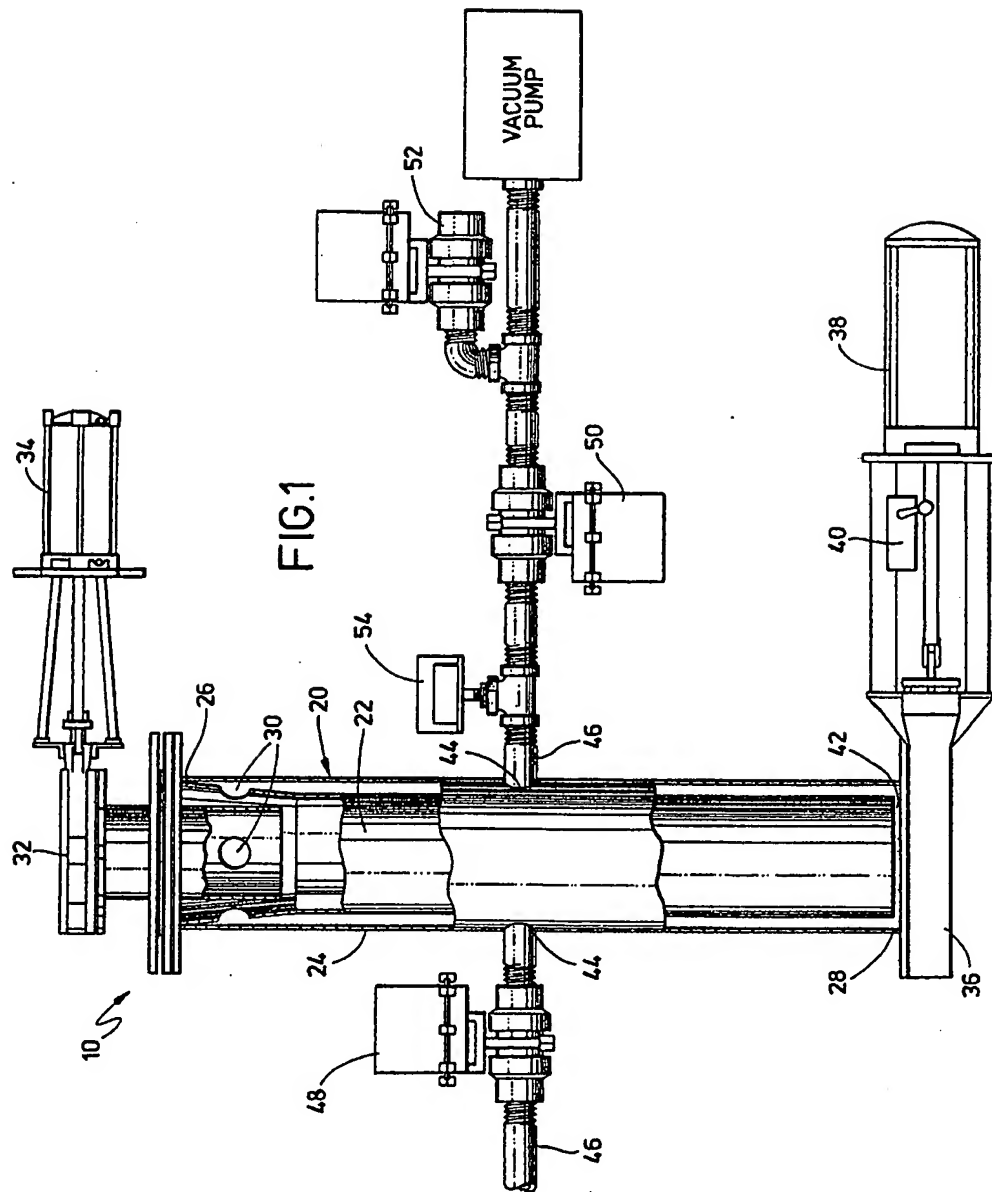
(30) (US) 643,704 1991/01/22

(57) 6 claims

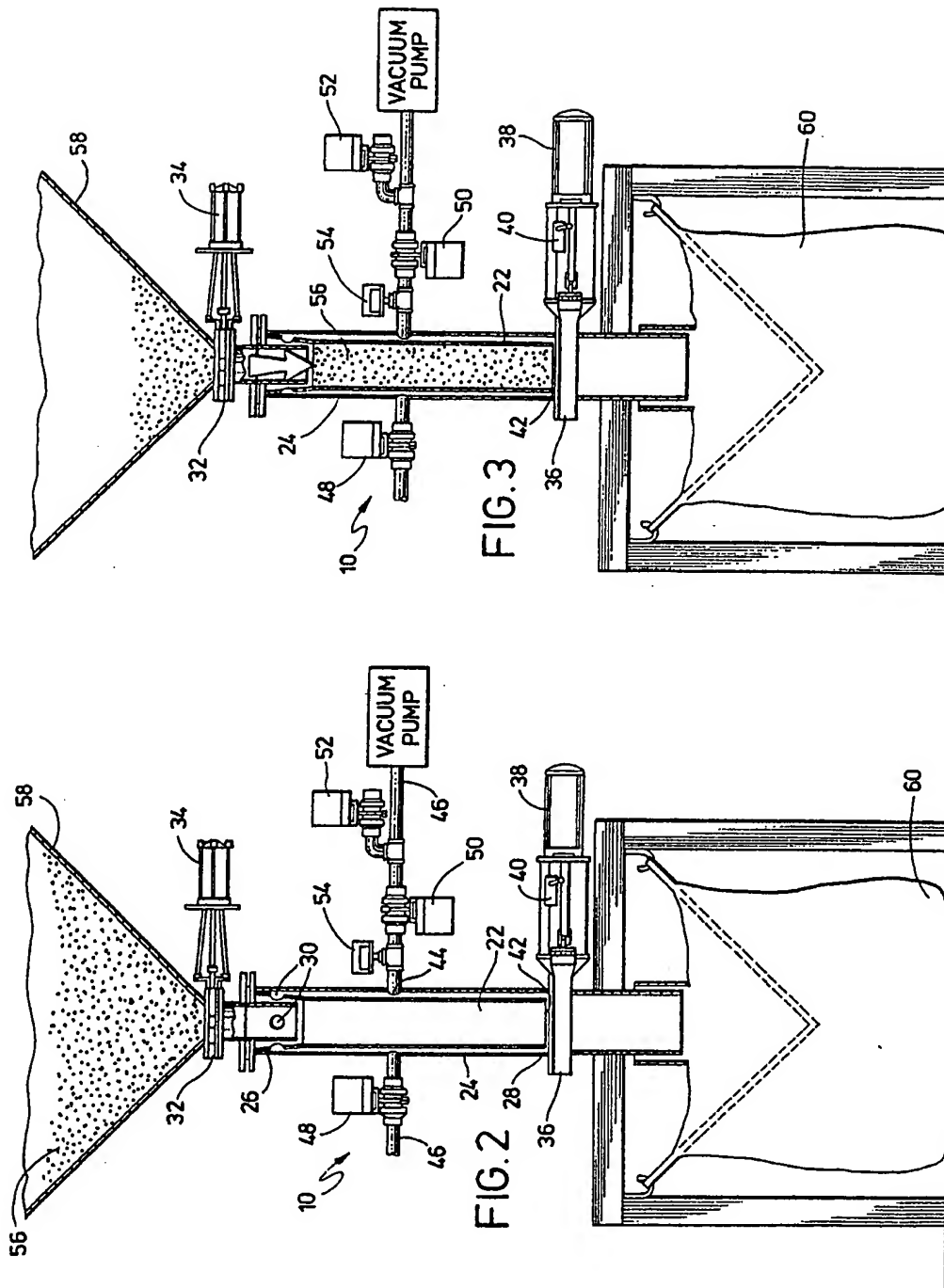
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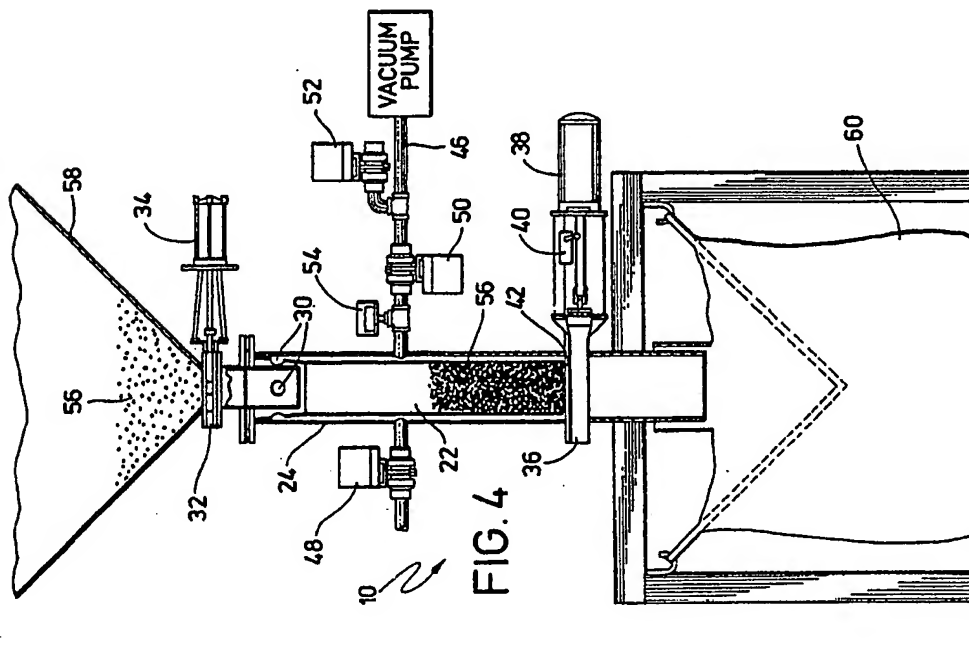
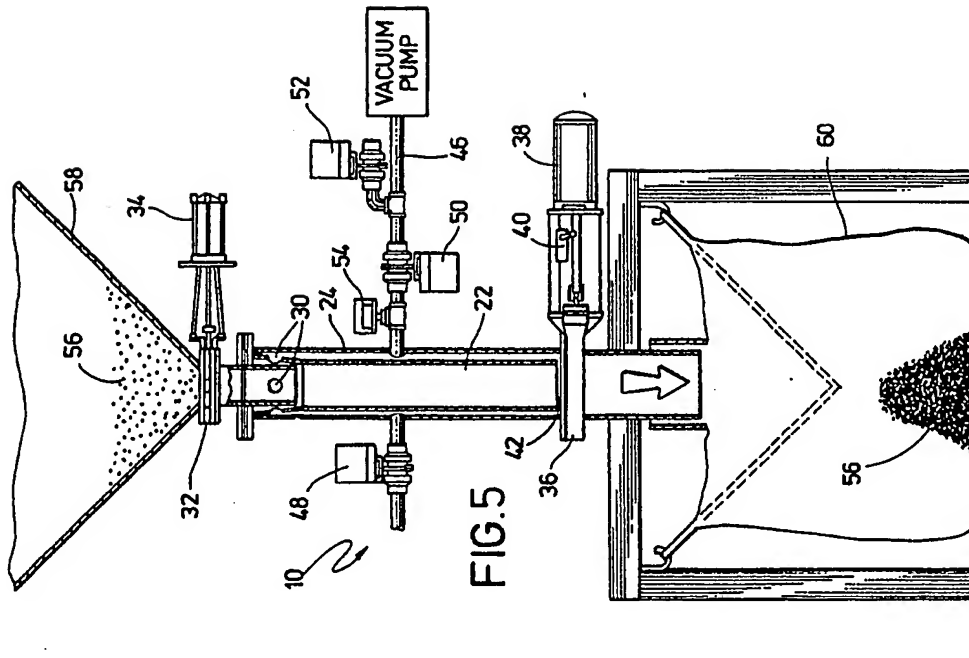
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Kirby, Ladies, Gales  
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PATENT

VACUUM FILL SYSTEM

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates to a vacuum fill system for  
deaerating flowable materials for storage in a  
5 container, and in particular, relates to a vacuum fill  
system for deaerating and compacting flowable materials  
used in flexible bulk containers.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Containers used in the storage, transportation, and dispensation of flowable materials have been around for as long as civilization itself. The use of such  
5 containers, however, has always been limited by (1) the weight, density, and other physical properties of the material being stored, and (2) by the process and type of container used to store the material.

Traditional filling processes and containers,  
10 however, have long been encumbered by a simple phenomenon that has exasperated consumers for decades - settling. Settling, as any purchaser of a bag of potato chips knows, means the bag is never completely filled when opened. This occurs due to the settling of the  
15 product inside during its filling and shipment. This simple settling phenomenon causes tremendous economic waste each year because of the misuse of storage space and container materials. This has been particularly true in the storage, transportation, and dispensation of  
20 flowable materials in semi-bulk quantities such as grains, chemicals and other bulky substances stored in flexible, bulk containers, such as those disclosed in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,143,796 and 4,194,652.

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It has long been known that the simple process of settling is caused by the natural aeration of flowable materials as the materials are placed inside a container. As the container is shipped to its final destination, the air escapes from the aerated material mixture causing the product to compact and reduce in volume. Thus, when the container is opened, the flowable material has settled to the bottom of the container, i.e. the bag of potato chips is only half full.

Any process or system, such as the present invention, for storing materials in a container for shipment that allows all of the container to be filled with product and eliminates the excess air results in an enormous cost savings. Indeed, the shipment of smaller sized containers using vacuum sealed packages such as, e.g., vacuum sealed coffee containers, has alleviated many of the above problems of cost and time.

Although vacuum sealed packaging has proved to be an efficient, cost-saving and consumer pleasing method of shipping small quantities of goods, before now, it has been impossible to apply such techniques into other

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areas of storage, transportation and dispensation of flowable materials. This has been particularly true in the market for semi-bulk flowable materials.

The present invention, however, substantially  
5 eliminates settling and the inherent problems associated therewith by providing a vacuum filling system that deaerates the flowable material during filling. The present invention thus allows more product to be transported than possible using prior techniques.

10 Additionally, by utilizing all of the container space, the present invention allows for the far more efficient total use of all of the container materials and space. No longer is money being spent for container material that is not used. Therefore, the present  
15 invention overcomes many of the difficulties inherent in prior filling systems.



SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a vacuum filling system for deaerating flowable materials, and in particular, to a vacuum system for use with flexible, bulk containers used to store, transport and dispense flowable materials in semi-bulk quantities.

The vacuum fill system of the present invention generally comprises a first container for holding the flowable material; means for controlling the flow of the flowable material into the first container; means for creating a vacuum in the first container for deaerating the flowable materials; means for compacting the deaerated material; and means for controlling the flow of the deaerated, compacted flowable material from the first container into a storage container for shipment.

In the preferred embodiment of the invention, the first container comprises a hollow, double chambered, cylindrical container in which the interior chamber has a plurality of openings at one end for the venting of air during filling. The inner chamber may also be of a perforated or woven material to allow for better evacuation and compaction. A first conventional slide

or knife gate and valve assembly is located at one end of the hollow, cylindrical container for controlling the flow of flowable materials into the inner chamber of the first container.

5 In the preferred embodiment, a conventional vacuum pump, capable of pulling a vacuum of eighteen (18) inches of mercury, for deaerating the flowable materials is connected to the first container through a series of butterfly valves and vacuum lines.

10 Finally, in the preferred embodiment, a second conventional slide or knife gate and valve assembly is located at one end of the first container for controlling the flow of deaerated flowable material into the storage container.

15 Operation of the vacuum fill system is simple and easy. The flowable material is placed inside of the inner chamber of the first container. A vacuum is created through the use of a plurality of valves and a conventional vacuum pump. After sufficient deaeration  
20 of the flowable material is achieved, the vacuum is released and the valves are opened substantially instantaneously causing the flow of air to compress the

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material into a compact mass. The compacted, deaerated flowable material then drops from the first container into a storage container for shipment.

By deaerating and compacting the flowable material  
5 before filling the container, through the use of the vacuum fill system, the flowable material is presettled and will not settle during shipment. Thus, the present invention allows for complete utilization of the storage container, eliminating wasted space and allowing for the  
10 shipment of more material without any increase in the container volume. Therefore, the present invention has numerous advantages over the prior art.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A more complete understanding of the invention may be had by reference to the following Detailed Description when taken in conjunction with the accompanying Drawings, in which:

FIGURE 1 is a sectional view of the vacuum fill system;

FIGURE 2 is a sectional view of the vacuum fill system illustrating its use with semi-bulk bags used for containing flowable materials;

FIGURE 3 is a sectional view of the vacuum fill system illustrating the filling of the first container with flowable material before deaerating;

FIGURE 4 is a sectional view of the vacuum fill system illustrating the deaerated flowable material; and

FIGURE 5 is a sectional view of the vacuum fill system illustrating the deaerated flowable material inside the storage container.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Referring to FIGURE 1, the vacuum fill system 10 has a hollow, cylindrical container 20, having inner and outer chambers 22 and 24, respectively. Chambers 22 and 24 have first and second ends 26 and 28. The inner chamber 22 connects with the outer chamber 24 at the first end 26 of the two chambers. In the preferred embodiment, the inner chamber 22 has a plurality of openings 30 which allow for the venting of air during use. The inner chamber 22 may also be made of a perforated or woven material to allow for better evacuation and compaction.

Attached to the first end 26 of the hollow, cylindrical container 20 and its inner and outer chambers 22 and 24 is a conventional knife or slide gate valve 32 and associated air cylinder 34 which controls the opening and closing of the gate 32. The slide gate valve 32 and air cylinder 34 are of conventional types well known in the art. When the gate valve 32 is in the open position, flowable material flows through the gate valve 32 and into inner chamber 22 of the hollow, cylindrical container 20.

At the second end 28 of the hollow, cylindrical container 20, there is a second slide or knife gate valve 36, which is normally of a slightly larger diameter than slide gate valve 32. The slide gate valve 36 also has associated with it an air cylinder 38 and switch 40, both well known in the art, which are utilized to open or close the slide gate valve 36 to allow flowable materials to exit from the hollow, cylindrical container 20 after deaeration and compaction. Also at the second end 28 of the container 20, is a gap 42 between the bottom of the inner chamber 22 and outer chamber 24 of the container 20. The gap 42 allows air to vent and is utilized to help form a vacuum during the deaeration process.

The outer chamber 24 of the hollow, cylindrical container 20 has a plurality of openings 44 into which vacuum lines 46 run. The vacuum lines 46 do not, however, connect to the inner chamber 22. In the preferred embodiment of the invention, there are at least two openings 44 and two vacuum lines 46 running in opposite directions. One of the vacuum lines 46 is connected to an actuated butterfly valve 48 which in

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turn connects to a conventional dust collector (not shown). The second vacuum line 46 is connected to a series of actuated butterfly valves 50 and 52, and from there to a conventional vacuum pump (not shown).

5 Although any conventional vacuum pump may be utilized with the present invention, the vacuum pump must be capable of pulling a minimum of eighteen (18) inches of mercury during operation. Also connected to the second vacuum line 46 is a conventional pressure  
10 switch 54, which is utilized to control the opening and closing of the valves 50 and 52.

FIGURES 2 through 5 illustrate the operation of the vacuum fill system of the present invention. Although the vacuum fill system 10, illustrated in FIGURES 2  
15 through 5, is used in connection with the filling of a semi-bulk container for handling flowable materials, it must be understood that the present invention is capable of being utilized with any type of container no matter how large or small where it is desired to compact,  
20 deaerate and densify the flowable materials for packing into a container for shipment and storage.

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Turning now to FIGURE 2, therein is illustrated the initial start up position of the vacuum fill system 10.

In FIGURE 2, valves 32, 36, 48 and 50 are closed. The flowable material 56 is contained within a conventional holding/storage device 58, such as a hopper. The vacuum fill system 10 is connected to a semi-bulk bag 60 through conventional means.

Turning to FIGURE 3, therein it is shown that the hollow, cylindrical container 20 has been filled with flowable material 56. In order to fill the hollow container 20, valves 32 and 48 have been opened. This results in the opening of slide gate valve 32 and the venting of air through valve 48 to the dust collector during the filling process. Once slide gate valve 32 is opened, the flowable material fills the inner chamber 22 up to the level of the openings 30. Openings 30 and gap 42 allow the dust to be vented to the dust collector through valve 48 and vacuum lines 46.

The flow of flowable materials into the inner chamber 22 is controlled either by weight or height level. When the predetermined level or weight is



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reached, valve 32 automatically closes preventing the flow of further flowable material 56 into the inner chamber 22 of the hollow, cylindrical container 20.

At this time, valves 48 and 52 are also closed automatically and valve 50 is opened. This creates a vacuum in the space between the inner and outer chambers 22 and 24.

Turning to FIGURE 4, therein is illustrated that flowable material 56 has been deaerated and compacted and that the volume of material 56 is now significantly less than when first introduced into the hollow, cylindrical container 20.

When the air is initially evacuated from the inner chamber 22, the volume of flowable material 56 actually increases slightly as the internal air passes through it and the vacuum is created. Thus, there is actually a volume gain until the chamber is returned to atmospheric pressure.

Once the vacuum reaches the necessary level to achieve the desired deaeration of the flowable material 56, valve 52 is opened immediately. Valve 52 must be opened suddenly and fully in order to get a high impact

on the material 56 from the entering air. The impact of the entering air compresses and compacts the deaerated, flowable material 56, both axially and radially, due to the internal low pressure previously created by the vacuum.

Subsequently, valve 36 is opened and the compacted, deaerated flowable material 56 flows as a compact "slug" of material into the desired container or, as illustrated, bulk bag 60. Since the compacted and deaerated material is highly densified and only drops a short distance before entering the container 60, there is very little chance of reaeration.

Finally, after the filling of the container 60 with the flowable materials 56, slide gate valve 36 closes and the vacuum fill system 10 is ready to begin a new cycle.

Although not shown, it should be understood that the operation of the vacuum fill system 10 may be performed either manually or automatically through the use of conventional electronic circuitry.

It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various changes may be made without departing from the

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scope of the invention, and the invention is not to be considered limited to what is described in the specification.

CLAIMS

1. A vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials for storage in a container comprising:

5 a first container for holding the flowable materials;

means for controlling the flow of the flowable materials into the first container;

means for creating a vacuum in the first container for deaerating the flowable materials;

10 means for compacting the deaerated flowable materials; and

means for controlling the flow of the deaerated, compacted flowable material from the first container into a storage container.

2. A vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials in accordance with Claim 1 wherein the first container further comprises a hollow, cylindrical container having inner and outer chambers, first and second ends and a plurality of openings.

3. A vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials in accordance with Claim 1 wherein the means for controlling the flow of the flowable materials into the first container further comprises a gate valve and air cylinder attached to the first container at a first end.

4. A vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials in accordance with Claim 1 wherein the means for creating a vacuum in the first container for deaerating the flowable material further comprises a plurality of valves and a vacuum pump connected to the first container.

5. A vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials in accordance with Claim 1 wherein the means for controlling the flow of the deaerated flowable materials from the first container into a storage container further comprises a gate valve and air cylinder attached to the first container at a second end.

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6. A vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials for storage in a container comprising:

a first hollow, cylindrical container having inner and outer chambers, first and second ends, and a plurality of openings;

a first gate valve and air cylinder attached to the first end of the cylindrical container for controlling the flow of the flowable materials into the first cylindrical container;

a plurality of vacuum lines connected to the cylindrical container at the circular openings;

a plurality of valves connected to the vacuum lines;

a vacuum pump connected to the vacuum lines for creating a vacuum in the cylindrical container for deaerating the flowable materials;

means for compacting the deaerated flowable materials;

a second gate valve and air cylinder attached to the second end of the cylindrical container for controlling the flow of the deaerated, compacted flowable material into the storage container; and

means for controlling the operation of the gate valves, valves and vacuum pump.

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VACUUM FILL SYSTEM

ABSTRACT OF THE DISCLOSURE

The present invention is a vacuum fill system for deaerating flowable materials for storage in a container. The vacuum fill system in general has a hollow, cylindrical container connected to a plurality of valves, slide gate valves and a vacuum pump in order to create a vacuum when filled with flowable materials that causes the flowable materials to deaerate and subsequently compact when atmospheric pressure is restored.

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